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The Duty and Privilege of Building and Adorning Churches.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

RE-OPENING OF CHRIST CHURCH,

LOUISVILLE.

On the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity.

BY JOHN N. NORTON,

Rector of Ascension Church, Frankfort.

LOUISVILLE:
HULLS & SHANNON.
1850.

HISTORICAL & PHILOSOPHICAL
SOCIETY OF OHIO

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MDCCCL.

LOUISVILLE, KY., September 11, 1850.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR :

The Rector, Wardens, and Vestry of Christ Church, respectfully ask of you,
for publication, a copy of your sermon preached on Sunday morning last.

JAMES CRAIK,

RICHARD BARNES,

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WM. CORNWALL,

L. P. MAURY,

JAMES SHANNON,

JAMES A. MILLER,

J. M. ROBINSON,

J. B. WILDER,

WM. ROSS,

JOHN P. SMITH,

JOHN POE,

JOHN N. BREDEN.

S E R M O N.

REMEMBER me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the House of my God, and for the offices thereof.

NEHEMIAH XIII. 14.

SUCH was the prayer of NEHEMIAH, after he had corrected the abuses which had crept into God's House, and restored to the Priests their lawful privileges and authority.

It appears that the father of NEHEMIAH did not return with the other Jews to their own land, after the seventy years' captivity, but remained with his family in Persia. In the course of time NEHEMIAH became cup-bearer to king Artaxerxes, which was a most honorable and important station.

While discharging the duties of his office, a report came from Judea, that the remnant of the Israelites were in a sad and depressed condition; and that, as the walls of Jerusalem had been thrown down, they were left defenseless, and exposed to the most imminent peril. These mournful tidings affected NEHEMIAH deeply, and he resolved to go at once to the assistance of his brethren.

Before asking leave of Artaxerxes, he prayed to Him in whose hands are the hearts of Kings, that He would grant him favor in the sight of his royal master; which request was answered. NEHEMIAH accordingly hastened to Jerusalem, and for twelve years was actively and successfully engaged in providing for the safety and welfare of the afflicted Jews. At the end of this period, he went back to Persia, and resumed his station at the Court. He had, however, hardly left Jerusalem before abuses of various kinds began to make their appearance.

Among others, the tithes which had been set apart for the support of the priesthood, and the due celebration of public worship, were most wickedly withheld, and squandered for other purposes; and, in consequence, the ministers of God's House were forced to neglect their sacred duties, and engage in worldly pursuits, to gain the means of livelihood. When NEHEMIAH heard of this he came back to Jerusalem, and by unwearied diligence and zeal, succeeded in reforming these abuses.

It was at the close of this great work that he offered up the petition contained in the text, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done for the House of my God, and for the offices thereof."

That NEHEMIAH did not make this request under the influence of self-righteous views of his own merits, or because he thought the Almighty was a debtor to him, is plain from another petition, found in the same chapter, "Remember me, O my God, concerning this also, and spare me, according to the greatness of thy mercy," verse 22.

The good works which he had been enabled to perform, were designed to promote God's glory. He was not a selfish and ambitious man, who sought, in this way, to advance his private interests. His motives were pure. He loved God, and proved the strength of his attachment by doing good to men; and this, not only by providing for their temporal wants, but by restoring the daily worship, and securing the means of support to those who ministered in the "House of Prayer."

"It is evident that NEHEMIAH expected that the Lord would remember his good deeds, and vouchsafe them a gracious recompense, notwithstanding defects in them, and sin in him; after the same manner as the apostle Paul assures the Hebrews, that the Lord would not forget their work and labor of love."¹

NEHEMIAH looked back with pleasure upon the hardships he had undergone, and the sacrifices he had made for the chosen people of God. The reflection that his exertions had secured for them the prayers, and instructions, and examples of the appointed servants of the altar, afforded him more satisfaction than all the honors and enjoyments to be found in the court of an earthly prince. His deeds were such as the Almighty approves, and it is a pleasing thought, my brethren, that we may imitate this pious Jew, by liberality and zeal "for the House of our God, and for the offices thereof."

Ever since the establishment of his kingdom upon earth, God's people have contributed of the wealth with which he

¹ Scott's Commentary, in loco.

has entrusted them, in building temples to the honor of his name.

It is delightful to read with what a cheerful spirit the Israelites presented their gifts for the erection of the Tabernacle. "They brought a willing offering unto the Lord, every man and woman. * * Bracelets, and ear-rings, and jewels of gold," and materials for "the holy garments" of the Priests, and "spice and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the sweet incense;" Exodus xxxv.; in short, every thing which they possessed, which could help along the good work.

When David found himself seated on the throne of Israel, he felt unwilling to remain in a "house of cedar," while "the ark of God dwelt within curtains;"² and proposed to build a temple more worthy of the Divine presence. The Almighty, however, commanded him to leave this work for Solomon, who accordingly carried out his wishes; and having finished "the House of the Lord," he "brought in the things which David his father had dedicated; the silver and the gold, and the vessels,"³ and then solemnly set it apart to the service of Jehovah.

The fires of persecution, which tried the faith of the early Christians, had not gone out before places for public worship were established. Several of the early Fathers understand the passage in 1 Corinthians xi. 22, "Have ye not houses to eat in, that ye despise the Church of God," as referring, not to the Assembly, but to the place, appointed for the offering up of prayers, the administration of the

² II Samuel vii. 2.

³ I King's vii. 51.

Sacraments, and the preaching of the gospel; thus tracing back the existence of church edifices to the first century.

During the second and third centuries, many references of the same kind are found; and it is mentioned of Eusebius⁴ that the number of believers had so increased "that their ancient churches were not large enough to hold them, and therefore they built more spacious ones in every city." At first they were, of course, cheap and plain, because Christians were unable to do better, but when their means increased they showed their gratitude to God by raising costly temples, "The glory of Lebanon, and the excellency of Carmel and Sharon" were given unto the Christian Church. All nations "have brought gold and incense, and showed forth the praises of the Lord. * * They have fallen down and made supplication."⁵

The world attributes such an outlay to "spiritual pride," and calls it "extravagance!" It is true, the differences of earthly glory can be nothing to the "High and Holy One," who dwells "in the light which no man can approach unto,"⁶ and who can only be worshipped acceptably when he is worshipped "in spirit and in truth;" but the fact is undoubted that the desire that God may be served in the most becoming way, is a strong proof that our hearts are right before Him.

Nothing but contracted parsimony ventures to ask, "To what purpose is this waste?" While men are building fine houses for themselves, and gathering about them all

⁴ Book viii. chapter 1.

⁵ Isaiah xxxv. 2; lv. 13 &c.

⁶ I Timothy vi. 16.

the comforts of life, is it right that a humble place should be set up and called God's House? "The silver and the gold" are His—He "giveth men power to get wealth." Are they justified, then, in employing the largest share for their own uses, and casting into the Lord's treasury the small surplus, which it costs them no sacrifice to contribute?

But besides the propriety of the thing, there are other reasons why "the temple of the Lord" should be built and adorned with taste and care, and the services performed therein "decently and in order." We are all, more or less, influenced by what some choose to call unimportant matters. To cite an example of every-day occurrence, our opinion of a man's character is often formed from merely noticing his dress or manners. To impress the mind deeply, with awe and reverence for the Almighty, the place where we meet to worship him should convey some idea of his greatness and glory. Even bigotry itself, which had power to lead a mighty intellect away from "the faith once delivered" to the church of the Redeemer, could not prevent his acknowledging this truth in most touching words:

"Oh may my due feet never fail
To walk the studious cloister's pale,
And love the high embowed roof,
White antique pillars, massy proof,
And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light;
There let the pealing organ blow
To the full voic'd choir below,
In service high and anthem clear,
As may with sweetness thro' mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes." 7

7 Milton's "Il Penseroso."

Such being the influence of externals upon the mind, it is hardly necessary to remark, that where the ability exists to beautify the sanctuary of God, it should be considered a duty and privilege to do it.

I congratulate you, my brethren, upon the improvements in this temple, which we witness here to-day. Such a praiseworthy example, I trust, may be often followed. People thus show that they feel in some degree that debt of gratitude which is due to God. The man in active life—whether his means be great or small—when summing up the profits of the year, should say, “This sum I dedicate to God!”—Those in feeble health, or in the decline of life, should remember in their wills “the House of God,” and bring a blessing on their wealth, by “lending to the Lord.”

What a comfort on our dying beds, to be able, with humbleness of heart, to say, as Nehemiah did, “Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and wipe not out my good deeds that I have done, for the House of my God, and for the offices thereof.”

May He dispose us thus to act! May He graciously accept the offerings we may bring! May He of his goodness grant that “our outward show may not outstrip our inward progress; that whatever gift, rare or beautiful, we bring into His temple, may be but a figure of inward beauty and unseen sanctity ornamenting our hearts.”

It was the impassioned declaration of the pious David, “I will not suffer mine eyes to sleep, nor mine eye-lids to slumber, neither the temples of my head to take any rest,

until I find out a place for the temple of the Lord; an habitation for the mighty God of Jacob.”⁸

Let it be our endeavor, brethren, to imitate his holy zeal! It is the exalted privilege of Christians to be “co-workers” with their God; and they should not be unmindful of it. We can all do something towards building up His kingdom, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that God “will not forget our work and labor of love.” The minister has his peculiar sphere of duty—the people have theirs. You can be regular at church—you can bear your part in the services—you can invite others to come with you—you can attend Church twice on Sunday—you can find scholars for the Sunday School, and help to teach them—you can instruct your children at home, in the catechism, and “train them up in the way they should go”—you can be liberal in your contributions—you can pray for your minister, and for the church at large. Above all, if you would ever reach heaven, you can, and ought, and must cultivate the humility, and patience, and charity, of quiet and consistent followers of the Lord Jesus.

If Pastor and People thus labor together, in dependence on God’s grace, “no weapon that is formed against you shall prosper.” Zion will soon “lengthen her cords and strengthen her stakes.” The consciousness that you are trying to do your duty, will cheer you in your work; and when your services in earthly temples are ended you may be sure of an entrance into that “building of God,” that “House not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

